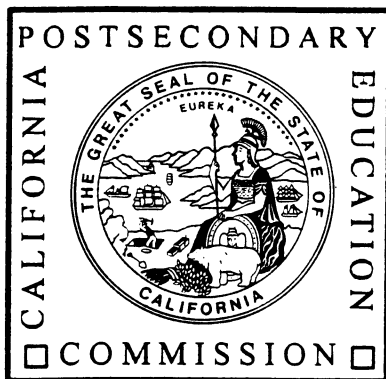


HIGHER EDUCATION UPDATE

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News from the CALIFORNIA POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION COMMISSION

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Enrolling a Student Body: The Changing College Admissions Process in the 1990s

THIS series of seven Higher Education Updates (with accompanying Fact Sheets) explores California's policies, programs, and practices designed to provide all our students with an equal opportunity to pursue their educational goals -- goals that benefit both the individual and our state. The Commission's intention in publishing this series is to enhance understanding among all Californians and our policy makers about the importance of educational equity to our State's future. Beginning in April 1997, the Commission will publish a Higher Education Update approximately every two months through April, 1998. At that time, the series will conclude with the publication of an Update that presents a set of options for the State to consider for furthering our goal of educational opportunity for all Californians.

The educational mission of our colleges and universities is to prepare students to participate productively in the world that they will enter upon graduation -- a world increasingly international, interdependent, and multicultural. The responsibility of our higher educational institutions, then, is to ensure that our graduates learn the skills, competencies, abilities, and attitudes to function effectively in diverse, inclusive, and global marketplaces and communities. To accomplish this goal, our colleges and universities strive to enroll an academically excellent student body on each campus that is inclusive of the backgrounds and cultures that increasingly comprise California and the world. In this regard, the college admissions process is of a critical importance.

What is the college-choice process?

The college-choice process is an interactive sequence of actions -- some controlled by the student and some by colleges and universities -- resulting in a student enrolling on a particular campus. Initially, students decide to apply to one or more institutions. At that point, the decision-making process passes to institutions as they make determinations about the applicant's admissibility. Upon institutional notification, the process is, once again, controlled by the student who selects from among those institutions offering admissions, with cost, availability of financial aid, and academic program offerings playing significant roles in the decision-making process. The interplay between the perspectives and goals of students and institutions is highlighted in the decisions that each makes at every stage of this interactive process.

From an institutional point of view, how can the college admissions process be described?

The college admissions process is a juggling act that involves encouraging a pool of students to apply, making decisions about the pool of applicants, and persuading a sufficient number to enroll who have the ability to succeed at the institution. This process could be described as a "mix-and-match" proposition -- often more art than science.

At the freshman level, traditional measures regarded as demonstrating ability are high school grades, college admissions test scores, and completion of college preparatory courses in high school. While considered objectives, grades and test scores are both imperfect and imprecise when used in isolation in the admissions process.

- ♦ **Imperfection:** The major limitation in using these traditional measures is that they are imperfect predictors of college success. High school grades are the best, albeit moderate, predictors of freshman grades; test scores add little beyond high school grades to the prediction of freshman performance. Moreover, there is virtually no association between high school grades or test scores and either college graduation or cumulative grades across the range of their measurements.
- ♦ **Imprecision:** The pool of freshman students who apply to a college attend different high schools whose grading practices vary. Therefore, grade-point average comparisons may contribute to imprecise judgments about students' ability or even prior achievement. While college admissions test scores are standardized, they are imprecise in two ways: (1) a student's performance may vary significantly from one test administration to another -- a reliability issue; and, (2) moderate score differences may not necessarily reflect actual ability differences.

Due to both these inadequacies, most colleges and universities have developed multiple and more robust measures to complement high school grades and admissions test scores in assessing the prior achievement of students and their potential for success at particular institutions.

Are there particular complexities to admitting a student body in a public institution?

The admissions process is especially complex at a public institution because of its responsibility to educate all the communities that comprise the State. President Daniel Coit Gilman, in his Inaugural Address as President of the University of California in 1872, expressed this point clearly:

This is 'The University of California' . . . the University of this State. It must be adapted to this people . . . to their geographical position, to the requirements of their new society and their undeveloped resources. It is not the foundation . . . of private individuals. It is 'of the people and for the people' It opens the door of superior education to all

Likewise, the University has understood that, as a land-grant institution, it has a responsibility to assemble a student body that mirrors the State's population because it will broaden the educational experience of all students -- a vi-

tal part of the educational mission of all colleges and universities.

This responsibility has been similarly understood by our State University -- a system that emerged from the public schools in 1960 -- and our community colleges that remain especially responsive to their local communities today. Moreover, this tenet that serving all communities of the State is inherent in the mission of public institutions has been supported by the governing boards of these systems and the California Legislature numerous times over the last two decades.

What are the current policies for selecting a freshman student body at California's public colleges and universities?

The 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education in California established policy guidelines for freshman admissions to our public colleges and universities:

Community Colleges: Any Californian who is 18 years or older with the capacity and motivation to benefit has the opportunity to enroll in our community colleges. When there are more applicants than spaces in specific academic programs, the current policy is "first-come, first-served" rather than a specification of admissions criteria.

California State University: The Master Plan encourages the State University to **select** its first-time freshmen from the top 33.3 percent of the public high school graduating class.

University of California: The Master Plan encourages the University to **select** its first-time freshmen from the top 12.5 percent of the public high school graduating class.

The public systems have the authority to set admissions requirements such that these guidelines are met.

Periodically, the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) conducts an Eligibility Study to review the extent to which the universities' admissions requirements yield pools of students consistent with the Master Plan guidelines. Based upon this study, our public university systems have modified their admissions requirements numerous times since 1960 in order to admit freshmen classes in concert with these guidelines.

What are the current admissions requirements for our public universities?

Admissions requirements vary by system, but each has three components: course pattern, performance, as measured by grades, and performance on college admissions tests, such as the SAT and ACT. The current requirements are presented on Display 1 on the next page:

DISPLAY 1 1997 Freshman Admissions Requirements for California's Public Universities

	<u>California State University</u>	<u>University of California*</u>
<u>Course Pattern (in years)</u>		
History/Social Sciences	1	2
English	4	4
Mathematics	3	3
Laboratory Science	1	2
Foreign Language	2	2
Visual/Performing Arts	1	N/A
Advanced Course Electives	3	2
<u>Performance in Courses (GPA)</u>	2.0 (all courses)	2.82 (Designated courses)
<u>College Admissions Test Requirement</u>	No tests if GPA is greater than 3.0	SAT I or ACT and Three SAT II Subject Tests
<u>College Admissions Test Performance</u>	An index that sets a specific score required for each GPA	An index that sets a specific score required for each GPA
	No set score if GPA is 3.0 or above	No set score if GPA is 3.3 or above

*Students can be admitted to the University by examination alone if their SAT score is 1400 or above or their ACT score is 31 or above, and they score a combined 1760 on the SAT II (Achievement Test), with no score below 530.

What does “eligible” mean in college admissions?

High school students who meet the respective admissions requirements for the State University or the University, as outlined above, are eligible for admission to that system.

Eligibility is the key concept in the current admissions process. If students meet the admissions requirements for a particular university system, they are eligible for admission to that system. If they do not meet those requirements, they are not eligible. That is, **eligibility is an “either-or” condition**; it is not a comparative judgment in which one student is more or less eligible than another.

An eligibility rate indicates the percentage of a specific group of high school graduates who are eligible to attend a public university system. Eligibility rates are computed on a statewide basis and by gender, by major racial-ethnic categories, by geographic regions, and by location in the state.

What are the major differences in eligibility rates across demographic categories?

The latest Eligibility Study reported that 29.6 percent of California 1996 high school graduates were eligible for the California State University -- 3.7 percentage points below the system's Master Plan guidelines of 33.3 percent. The corresponding estimate for the University of California is 11.1 percent -- 1.4 percentage points below the Master Plan recommendation of 12.5 percent.

- ♦ Women achieved eligibility to attend both of our public universities in greater proportions than men.
- ♦ The eligibility rates for Asian students were above the

Master Plan guidelines for both systems.

- ♦ The eligibility rates for Black students were below the Master Plan guidelines for both systems.
- ♦ The eligibility rates for Latino high school graduates were below the Master Plan guidelines for both systems.
- ♦ The eligibility rates for White students tended to most closely resemble the Master Plan guidelines and the statewide population average for both systems.
- ♦ Considerable variation exists in eligibility rates by geographic region. The San Francisco Area, Orange County, and the San Diego/Imperial County region had the highest rates; the more rural areas had the lowest rates.
- ♦ Suburban students were more likely to be eligible for both public university systems than either their rural or urban classmates.

If our campuses are to encompass the broad diversity of California's population, then differences in eligibility rates among students from specific racial-ethnic groups, geographic regions, and types of communities pose challenges for our public universities in assembling a student body reflective of our varied backgrounds and experiences.

What are the current admissions practices of our public universities?

While the Master Plan encourages the State University and University to select its freshmen student body from the top

33.3 percent and 12.5 percent, respectively, the governing boards of the State University and University have established the following policy: **all applicants who meet the admissions requirements of the respective system will be admitted to that system.** In this sense, these systems have exceeded the Master Plan guidelines by **admitting, rather than selecting from, all eligible applicants to their systems.**

How does the current admissions process function at the State University?

Except at the Cal Poly campus at San Luis Obispo, which has more applicants than freshman spaces, the State University admits all eligible students to the campus(es) to which they apply. At the Cal Poly campus, measures of academic achievement -- high school grades and college admissions test scores -- are the primary selection criteria. In addition, supplemental criteria, such as extracurricular activities and work experience, are used to select from among eligible applicants. Similar criteria are used with respect to admissions to academic programs on campuses in which there are more applicants than spaces.

How does the current admissions process function at the University?

Although all eligible applicants are offered a place in the University system, the admissions process is complicated and varies by campus:

- ♦ All eligible applicants to Riverside and Santa Cruz are admitted to those campuses.
 - ♦ At the other six general campuses where there are more eligible applicants than freshman places, between 50 and 75 percent of freshmen are admitted based solely upon their academic accomplishments, including quality of completed courses, rigor of their senior year, grade point average, and test scores. The remainder of the freshmen are selected based on academic accomplishments and their personal traits, talents, and unusual experiences that indicate their potential to contribute to the educational environment and vitality of the campus.
-

What are the factors of potential contribution to a campus that the University currently considers in selecting a student body at campuses where there are more eligible applicants than spaces?

In selecting from a pool of eligible applicants, the University currently considers the following factors in combination:

- ♦ Special talents, interests, or experiences that demonstrate unusual promise for leadership, achievement, and

service in a particular field, such as civic life or the arts.

- ♦ Special circumstances that may have affected an applicant's life experiences, including:
 - having a physical or mental disability;
 - having personal difficulties;
 - being a member of a low-income family;
 - being a refugee; and,
 - being a veteran.
- ♦ Capacity to contribute to the cultural, economic, and geographic diversity of the student body.

The inclusion of these factors in the admissions process is expected to result in a class that has the potential to contribute to the educational environment and vitality of a campus. However, **these factors are considered only after students have demonstrated that they have met the admissions requirements.**

Have the factors of potential contribution to a campus changed recently?

The Board of Regent of the University decided to eliminate consideration of race, ethnicity, color, national origin, and gender in its admissions policies and practices in 1995 through a resolution known as SP-1. Prior to this decision, these factors were included among the list of "academic achievement and promise" criteria.

Why doesn't the University select students solely on the basis of academic achievement?

Once the pool of academically eligible students has been identified, the University considers other factors in its admissions process for the following reason: it seeks a student body on each campus that is inclusive of various talents, life experiences, and backgrounds such that the education of **all** enrolled students will be enriched and **all** students will be better prepared to be productive members of the world they will enter upon college graduation.

Admissions practices at other selective campuses throughout the country -- public and independent -- indicate that the vast majority of institutions use a combination of academic factors and other criteria beyond only high school grades and test scores to assemble a freshman class. For example, independent colleges and universities have, in the past, emphasized geographic balance so eligible students from states such as Wyoming or Idaho were often admitted. Basically, all selective institutions attempt to enroll a student body reflective of the rich diversity of backgrounds, experiences, talents, and aptitudes in their pool of academically eligible applicants.

Why has admission to our public universities become controversial if all eligible applicants are admitted to the public system(s) to which they apply?

It is important to distinguish between admission to a public university system and admission to a specific campus within that system. The Master Plan policy guidelines speak to admission to a system; they do not address admission to a particular campus or program of study. Similarly, the current practice revolves around offering admission to the system for all eligible applicants.

In particular, admissions to the University of California has received considerable attention in recent discussions about the legality, fairness, and equity of "affirmative action". **While all eligible applicants continue to be admitted to the University, the controversy has centered on admissions to specific campuses within the system.** That is, not all eligible applicants have been admitted to their first choice campus or program of study, especially if that campus is Berkeley or Los Angeles, or the program of study is Engineering, Computer Science, or specific unique programs on each campus. In both these cases, there are more eligible applicants than spaces and campuses must choose from among **eligible** students. The process by which these decisions are made is a contentious matter.

Display 2 provides a picture of this situation. The set of concentric circles on the left presents the circumstances with respect to the system as a whole: from the pool of eligible students, all those that apply are admitted to the system. Once admitted, students decide whether to enroll. On the other hand, the set of circles on the right illustrates the situation at selective campuses of the University: the pool of eligible students yields a group of eligible applicants;

because there are more applicants than spaces, campuses must make a decision about whether to admit a student; those accepted constitute the pool of admitted students. As is the case with the set of circles on the left, students then make a decision whether to enroll.

Let's examine the challenge of selecting a student body for a campus such as Berkeley: In 1997, 27,250 students applied to Berkeley; 8,450 were admitted and 3,520 freshmen were expected to enroll. Of the over 24,000 eligible applicants, nearly 12,000 of these students had grade point averages of 4.0 or better. Therefore, irrespective of the factors that Berkeley used in choosing a freshman class, sheer arithmetic means that Berkeley lacked space to enroll close to 8,480 applicants with at least 4.0 grade point averages. This situation is intensified because thousands of other applicants with less than 4.0 grade point averages are also fully eligible for admission to Berkeley.

This illustration highlights two significant aspects of the admissions process at the University:

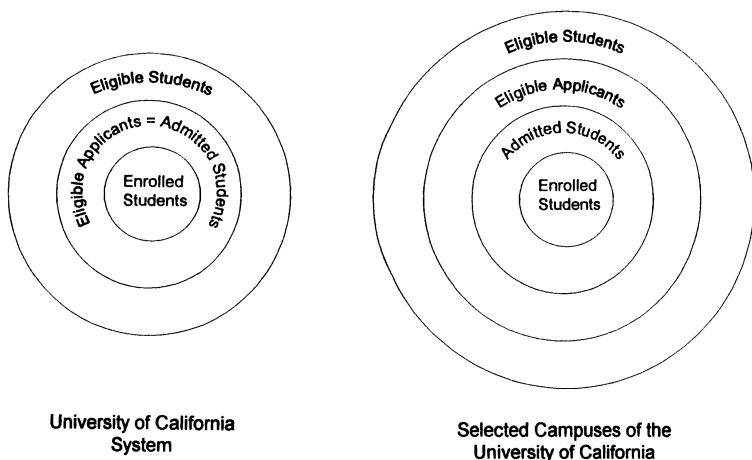
- ♦ All eligible Californians who applied to Berkeley had the opportunity to become an University of California freshman -- an opportunity that exceeds the promise of the Master Plan -- but only 3,520 became Golden Bears.
- ♦ Because the University's campuses, particularly Berkeley and Los Angeles, have more eligible applicants than can be accommodated, their admissions process is likely always to be controversial.

Is consideration of potential contribution to a campus giving unfair advantage to some students?

As stated above, consideration of these criteria is predicated upon the goal of creating an academically excellent student body that is inclusive of the variety of talents, life experiences, and backgrounds of Californians. Therefore, a student who possesses an unique talent -- such as playing the oboe or excelling in debate or in athletics -- or a student who is from a low-income background, or a student who is from a geographic area of the state that sends few high school graduates to the University may be selected before other students in order to have that characteristic or talent on each campus.

However, the pool of students for whom these factors are considered have already demonstrated their academic eligibility to attend the University. That is, prior academic achievement is the single determinant of admission to the system; the use of additional factors is the University's strategy by which to enroll an inclusive and diverse student body on each campus from an applicant pool that has already demonstrated academic excellence.

DISPLAY 2 College Admissions at the University of California



Are there quotas in the University's admissions process?

No. In 1978, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the Bakke decision that quotas or "set-asides" in college admissions were unconstitutional. However, this decision stipulated that race could be given some consideration in a college admissions process in order to promote "the robust exchange of ideas".

Are students ever admitted to the State University or University who are not eligible because they did not meet the admissions requirements?

Yes. The Board of Trustees of the California State University and the Board of Regents of the University of California have authorized that a specific percentage of their new or freshman classes may be admitted through a process known as "admissions by exception." These students are regarded as having exceptional potential to succeed but, due to individual difficulties or inadequate schooling, have not demonstrated a sufficiently high level of academic achievement to be eligible at the time that they applied. At the State University, eight percent of all new students may be "admitted by exception." At the University, six percent of entering freshmen can be "admitted by exception", but the University has admitted a smaller percentage through this process than authorized in recent years.

Summary

Currently in California, an imbalance exists between the number of eligible applicants and spaces available. As such, there may be no absolutely equitable and fair process by which to choose a class. Given that reality, then, our campuses have developed selection processes that seeks to balance individual student achievement, their responsibilities as public institutions to serve all California communities, and their perspective on educational excellence. However, students and their parents who pay taxes view the opportunity to enroll at a public campus of first choice as a reward for academic excellence in high school. From the perspective of a student (or his or her parent) who is unable to attend the campus of first choice, a public institution's balancing act may be of lesser concern than personal disappointment resulting from an unfavorable decision. The meshing of these legitimate perspectives is central to the current discussion about the college admissions process -- the results of which are displayed on the accompanying fact sheet for the Class of 1996.

This Update discusses one goal of our higher educational institutions -- to enroll an academically excellent student body reflective of the diversity of the State's population -- a prerequisite to preparing our students for the world that they will enter upon graduation from our colleges and universities. A second mandate for our institutions is to create learning environments that capitalize on the intellectual, demographic, and experiential diversity of the student body -- a topic for the next installment in this series.

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